

**7** *Cultural identity development is linked to critical thinking and intercultural competence. This chapter articulates those connections and describes strategies for dealing with difference effectively in the classroom.*

## Expressing Cultural Identity in the Learning Community: Opportunities and Challenges

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One of the most persistent and problematic dilemmas I have experienced as a university faculty member is teaching and dealing with difference in the classroom. There are moments when I feel pride and success with the challenges my students embrace and conquer with grace and intelligence, but those times are far outweighed by moments of silence, misunderstanding, and anger. When a faculty member "allows" cultural identity and its associated issues to take center stage in the classroom, the outcome is always tenable. Because of the risk inherent in addressing and promoting cultural identity, many faculty members choose not to "go there." Excluding these different perspectives produces outcomes that are more troublesome than those that arise through taking the risk. Inhibiting the expression of cultural identity in the classroom denies learning opportunities that not only promote the development of complex meaning-making but also strengthens students' sense of self and furthers the acquisition of the types of competence needed to thrive in a diverse world community. In this chapter, I address some of the common areas of difficulty when infusing cultural identity in learning communities by sharing the insights I have gained through both research and classroom teaching.

I begin by sharing the development of my own perspectives about cultural identity. Anyone who chooses to step in front of a classroom and actively pursue these topics needs to engage in an examination of his or her own cultural identity. It cannot be subject matter that stands removed from the self. Faculty members who neglect this self-exploration run the risk of

responding with defensiveness and falling into the all too familiar role of the unchallengeable authority. My own story will serve as an example, as it reveals the complexity of issues surrounding cultural identity in the learning community. It highlights the individual differences found in culturally different students; the contradictions of multiple ethnic heritages; the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity; and the pedagogy in the academy that often inhibits us from seeing students as holding knowledge that may better inform our own.

I grew up with a very strong sense of being Mexican American. I also knew that my mother's family was not Mexican, as I was constantly reminded that that was the real reason I did not speak Spanish. What I did not realize is that I was half white; in fact, I'm still processing that. My mother is Portuguese, as was my *madrina* (godmother), whom I grew up very close to. There were so many congruities between the Portuguese and Mexican cultures that it felt seamless. Because both sides of my family are filled with very strong women, I also developed a very strong identity as a woman and a feminist. I lack memories of experiences as racist or discriminatory, although I can now reflect on the fact that I was the only Mexican American student in the college-prep courses at my high school, despite the large number of Mexican families and their children in the community, as evidence of discrimination. In contrast, college offered me many insights. There, I was a "racial" being. At times I was not "Mexican" enough; at other times I was a representative of Mexican American students without even knowing it.

My professional experiences as a student affairs administrator and later as a teacher in the college setting taught me about the experiences of culturally different students in the academy. Working with Latino/a students in a residential cultural house taught me a great deal about issues of policy and identity politics in the university but even more about the struggles and successes of very special and unique students. My comfortable middle-class upbringing and the guidance and pressure of my college-educated father and his high goals for me supported my college pursuits. Working with those students in Casa Cautehmoc, who straddled two worlds—the home and academy—gave me insights that would have otherwise taken me years to develop.

These experiences led me to think about ethnic identity and cultural identity as a foundation for my research agenda in studying college students. Even in research, the students who have been participants in my studies have taught me far more than the hours I spent "reviewing the literature." Three studies in particular inform what I know about cultural identity in the learning community. The first was my study on ethnic identity in college students (Ortiz, 1997). The findings told me that students who live and grow up in very diverse environments may develop and experience their ethnic identity in ways that were quite different from the models I found in the literature. The second is a study of a cross-cultural mediation program at a major university (Ortiz, 1995). In this study, I followed a diverse group of women through a course on conflict and diversity and their training to become cross-cultural mediators. Intensely studying a "multicultural education" program

helped me understand that the development of what I called racial understanding progresses through a cognitive development process. The third is a recent study on the development of intercultural competence in U.S. students studying abroad (Moore and Ortiz, 1999). In this study, the literature review did introduce me to many new ideas such as intercultural perspective taking and intercultural competence. The students in the study helped me see that the development of intercultural competence depends on risk taking, considering other worldviews, and deconstructing and then reconstructing one's identity.

Teaching college students has shown me that there are a wealth of opportunities to enhance epistemological development through the exploration of various manifestations of cultural identity in the learning community. Throughout the remainder of the chapter, I discuss this assumption within the framework of intercultural competence described by Sorti (1990). Within his framework, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive dimensions merge to create an interculturally competent person. The development of cultural identity, worldview, and intercultural perspective taking is related to these dimensions. Cultural identity is primarily an intrapersonal, psychological task but is enhanced by interaction with others. Worldview is primarily a cognitive phenomenon but is also reflective of the development of the self, an intrapersonal construct. Intercultural perspective taking blends all three dimensions. The ability to take the perspective of another is a cognitive skill that is also interpersonal in that it enhances interactions, but it is also intrapersonal because it requires the development of empathy. Vibrant classroom settings have the potential to attend to the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive dimensions in unique ways.

## The Development of Cultural Identity

The terms *ethnic identity*, *racial identity*, and *cultural identity* are used interchangeably, depending on the focus of the model being described. Ethnic identity as a construct has two aspects: content and salience. The content of ethnic identity refers to the customs, language, behaviors, music, literature, heroes, values, and worldview that a group with a common ethnic heritage shares. The salience of ethnic identity describes the degree to which membership in the group and the content of ethnic identity are important to the individual's sense of self.

Racial identity development models include both the content and salience of an ethnic identity but add the process by which individuals come to terms with the consequences of that group's place in society. Realizing that racism exists and developing a positive self-concept as a member of a racial group are emphasized in these models.

I use *cultural identity* in this chapter because it is a broader term that encompasses racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Cultural identity is very similar to ethnic and racial identity, but the commonality does not have to be ethnic. Groups with common values, customs, practices, and experiences

might be religious groups or gay, lesbian, or bisexual communities. Members of cultural groups, ethnic or otherwise, experience varying degrees of identification with the group, participate in the customs or activities of the group, and have similar belief systems. They also often experience oppression in ways similar to those described by racial identity models. Many authors (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, 1993; Cross, 1991; Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1992) posit that the degree of identification an individual may have with a culture is a developmental process of exploration and commitment to that group.

Enculturation and acculturation are processes that also describe the development of cultural identity, although not necessarily through stage models. Enculturation is the socialization process by which individuals acquire the host of cultural and psychological qualities that are necessary to function as a member of one's group. Acculturation is the product of culture learning that occurs as a result of contact between the members of two or more culturally distinct groups, a process of attitudinal and behavioral change undergone, willingly or unwillingly, by individuals who reside in multicultural societies (Casas and Pytluk, 1995). Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino/as exemplify the problematic nature of acculturation and group diversity. There is great diversity within these groups. Native Americans are members of distinct tribes, but many members also have mixed ethnic heritages. Asian American and Hispanics come from a wide range of countries and also differ within and between specific national groups by generational status (time in the United States). The enculturation and acculturation processes explain how people come to feel a part of their specific cultural group while embracing the larger culture. Choney, Berryhill-Paapke, and Robbins (1995) propose an acculturation model that determines the degree to which a person has experienced acculturation to mainstream culture. They call the levels of acculturation traditional, transitional, bicultural, assimilated, and marginal (unconnected to either culture). Acculturation to mainstream culture may occur along cognitive (language and customs), behavioral (activities), affective or spiritual (connection to others and religion), and social or environmental (place they live, who they socialize with) dimensions. For example, a traditional Japanese American may keep the language and customs learned in Japan, participate in traditional Japanese activities, practice Buddhism, and live in a Japanese enclave in a large city.

**Opportunities for Learning.** Students from distinct ethnic or cultural groups often experience both enculturation and acculturation in their new environment. The earlier example of the woman who gained a greater sense of academic self-confidence once she began to learn more about the history of African Americans also serves as an example of someone who is becoming more enculturated to her own cultural group. Likewise, many college students who come from highly enculturated families and communities experience acculturation when they come to college. A Korean student talks about his own acculturation:

Although there might be some negative aspects to the mainstream, there are a lot of positive points which Asian cultures lack, like being independent, being open-minded. I think those are all a part of mainstream America and how the Western culture really acts. I did adapt a lot. I think the phrase "Korean American" is appropriate because you do have both cultures, and if you can't adapt or if you can't accept the two cultures, then I think the term "Korean American" is misleading.

This student also demonstrates how students consider new possibilities that may be seen as positive contributions to their personality and sense of self. His experience in evaluating parental values and integrating newly discovered values into his sense of self illustrates further connections to moral and epistemic development.

Cross's Model of Nigrescence (1991), which Mary Howard-Hamilton discussed in Chapter Five, is one of the earliest and most studied models of cultural identity (although it is a racial identity development model). The starting point of the model is marked low salience of race, and the endpoint is an integrated personality where a positive sense of self includes commitment to being black and to the progress of the racial group and improvement of conditions for members of that group. The process is one where the development of Nigrescence is a resocializing experience. In terms of the learning community or a classroom environment, there are many opportunities and challenges in this framework alone.

Students who are in the encounter and immersion-emersion stages provide excellent examples of how exploration in the classroom can assist in the development of "self." The resocializing and reeducation process that begins in encounter may often occur as a result of course reading, lectures, and discussion, especially if the student is in an ethnic studies course. One of the students from my study on ethnic identity tells of the importance such curricula had in her encounter-stage experience:

I was never taught true history. All I was ever taught was that black people were brought over here as slaves and it was a good thing that happened because we weren't very civilized. Once I came to college, I became interested in African American history and African history. It really change me. I changed everything about my life because then I was proud of my identity. I'm proud to be black, proud to be African. I didn't realize the transformation at first, but as I looked back and saw how my thinking started to change as soon as I started taking those classes, I realized I probably would have done better in school. Maybe I would have had a 4.0 and gotten a scholarship to a better school.

This student not only developed a positive sense of self but also had the insight to connect how a lack of attention to the history of her cultural group inhibited her success as a student. The *liberation* she experienced by integrating alternative perspectives to her view of the world allowed her to

change her thinking in ways that had profound effects for her, personally and academically.

The opportunity for peer learning also presents itself in contexts where students are encouraged to talk about the development of their cultural identity. Students who exhibit the extroverted enthusiasm of the immersion-emersion stage may serve as role models for other students. A Latina from the same study tells of what she learned from a peer who was in the immersion-emersion stage: "My friend is always saying 'I'm proud to be black.' She always says, 'Stand up for yourself!' She never lets anybody get her down or anything. She's always very positive about being black. Well, I'm proud to be Mexican! That's one thing I learned from her." Students' responses to their immersion-emersion peers often reflect their own epistemic development. The quote shows a relationship to knowledge that is more authority-driven: the speaker models the "more developed" student.

Another student offers a glimpse of how she is beginning to think contextually about her own cultural identity, reflecting interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive domains:

There's a big issue about "are you Chicana, Latina, Mexican American, or what?" And I identify more with Mexican American. I don't know, I guess that's because I have been told that since I was young, . . . but I see myself more as a Mexican American, and that's my heritage. . . . To be Chicana, I think, is more political. I think that is a political term. . . . I know about different issues that they advocate, but I don't participate, so I don't feel comfortable calling myself Chicana. . . . But there have been times that I have said that I am something else, because of the environment. . . . [I was at] a conference and . . . everybody else called themselves Chicana and so did I. But I have to say that I can't identify myself as one.

There is the distinct sense that this student is in the midst of the encounter stage. Though confused about how to identify herself, she shows quite clearly that she is beginning to make meaning of her world and herself in different ways. She is beginning to grasp the notion that knowledge, even what she knows about herself, is often grounded in context. Simply discussing the various labels students use to describe themselves can elicit complex reasoning that helps students think critically about dimensions of the self.

**Challenges Surrounding the Expression of Cultural Identity.** There is also a sense that the student is grappling with how to interact with her more politically oriented peers, which is demonstrative of one of the more difficult challenges of having students with differing developmental experiences with cultural identity in the same classroom. Students in the immersion-emersion stage often show little acknowledgment of contextual differences in cultural identity development. Students whose views differ may feel that they are not a "good enough" cultural or ethnic person and may be inhibited to continue exploration of this part of the self. This may be an espe-

cially vexing problem for mixed-race students or for students who may be in the pre-encounter and encounter stages. This is also a problem for students who strive to balance competing cultural identities. How does gender or sexual orientation intersect with this process? Does being gay or lesbian take precedence over being black? Does one cultural identity have to take precedence over another? These are all important questions as we develop positive learning environments for students.

The work of Helms (1995) and Tatum (1992) demonstrates the challenge of negotiating difference in the classroom setting when students are from different ethnic backgrounds and at different levels of development. The resistance of white students and some students of color to discussing these issues in ways that reinforce complex meaning-making cannot be overstated. The professor must dance along the fine line between engagement and alienation in these matters! I borrow from the tenets of cultural identity models, perspective taking, and worldview when designing lectures and class activities intended to lessen initial tension about the subject and then work systematically toward more complex understandings of culture and its relationships to self and society (Ortiz and Rhoads, 1999).

Cultural identity models also present a challenge for us in our own learning. Stage models comfort us because they appear to offer some level of certainty, but we always have to be aware of the diversity among individuals in any group of people organized around any variable. Another error we make when learning about cultural identity models as they apply to students is that we too often try to predict human and student behavior instead of trying to understand it. I find that students react rather strongly to stage models. They can tell immediately when the models do not reflect their own experiences or those of people they know. So presenting models in ways that tell students what their experiences were, are, or are likely to be may actually diminish our credibility with them. It is more productive to proceed with caution and to recognize that models can only explain how certain individuals *may* be at different points in time.

## **Culture and Worldview**

There is a direct connection between cultural identity and worldview. Our culture defines how we view the world around us because it shapes our values, determines our interactions with the dominant culture, and directs our attention by telling us what is important in the world we inhabit. As a consequence of our culture, we pay more attention to some things than to others. Worldview is our abstract understandings of the world, involving broad domains of life such as human nature, interpersonal relationships, physical nature, time, and activities (Trevino, 1996). It is formed by culture—both the culture one shares with one's group and the culture that evolves from one's unique experiences. Culture informs our interpretation of the events around us and shapes our understanding of the people we come in contact

with. The connection is so close and direct that we are seldom conscious that this influence is at work.

In a learning community where there are different cultures, clashes arise when differing worldviews prevent people from understanding what is important or valued by other communities and individuals within the university. For example, if my worldview is the dominant one, there are certain values and understandings of the world I possess—for example, I may not understand what miseducation means, or I may not understand why people need to express their culture through activities, organizations, and courses. I may not understand why some teaching methods privilege some while inhibiting others. I may believe that the world and knowledge are logical, orderly, and fair.

However, if I'm a culturally different person, my worldview may be completely different, and that changes not only the way I view others and society but also my entire relationship with knowledge. For example, there are some things I "know" from my experience as a culturally different person:

- People may not succeed even if they try very hard; meritocracy is therefore a false concept.
- Our legal system does not always operate in a fair and equitable way; thus justice does not exist for all people.
- In making life choices, I have to consider the needs of others, the expectations of those I respect, and the progress of my community; so rugged individualism, where the needs of the individual override the needs of the group, is not an option for me.

Meritocracy, justice, and individualism are deeply ingrained in American culture. Yet many of our students know that these "givens" are not a part of their realities. As a result, they come to know that knowledge and truth are contextual, that authorities do not know all the answers, and that their life experiences very much determine their realities. This may be why my study on the cognitive dimensions of racial understanding showed that women of color came to know at higher stages of cognitive development. The models advanced by Perry (1970), Baxter Magolda (1992), and King and Kitchener (1994) all posit that lower stages of cognitive development involve concrete thinking and a belief in absolute knowledge, whereas higher levels reflect an ability to consider knowledge based on context, using judgment derived from personal experiences and evidence from other sources and from the perspective of others. This raises the distinct possibility that culturally different worldviews may lead to greater complexity in thinking, as suggested by King and Shuford (1996).

Using this often untapped potential in the learning community can increase critical thinking for all students. Students who construct their own knowledge based on their worldview and experiences help others challenge authority—either the authority of the instructor or the authority inherent



in the printed word. When the classroom climate invites critique rather than suppress it, all students benefit. Those with differing worldviews feel that their knowledge has a place in the academy, and other students both learn from these views and begin to understand that they can develop and project their own voice in the discourse. The idea that knowledge is not static but contextual is fundamental to the development of critical thinking.

## **Intercultural Perspective Taking and Intercultural Competence**

As we learn more about our own worldview and the worldview of others, we develop the ability to take the intercultural perspective of others. Intercultural perspective taking (Kappler, 1998; Steglitz, 1993) is a cognitive skill that enables the individual to recognize the existence and impact of culture and understand the ways in which cultures can vary. In various studies, the ability to generate possible cultural explanations as a cause of problems in intercultural interactions—the cognitive dimension—accounts for up to 80 percent of the variance in intercultural competence. The cognitive nature of intercultural perspective taking is highlighted by Steglitz's model of how we come to understand how behavior and perspectives are shaped by culture, how culture influences individuals, how culturally different people may be influenced by their culture (or cultures), and how culture might influence the interpretation and perception of a situation.

In my research with students studying abroad (Moore and Ortiz, 1999), intercultural perspective taking included an ability not only to take the perspective of a culturally different other but also to examine one's own culture from the perspective of people outside it. Students were forced to confront realities of life in America and how the world feels about Americans. One student said, "I never realized how American I was until I lived in Italy. . . . You realize exactly who you are and what you represent." This put them in the "third position," forced to stand outside their identity as Americans and outside the culture they were living in. Thinking about being an American while in a foreign country caused students to evaluate and eventually to value both the host culture and American culture. They saw the foreign and environmental policies of the American government in a different light. They were able to identify the isolationist attitude of Americans with regard to the rest of the world. Some time after developing a sense of shame about being American, students began to evaluate the host culture in a more objective way. They came to the conclusion that cultures and societies cannot be evaluated along the simplistic lines of right and wrong. They saw that aspects of society could be valuable in some cases and damaging in others. This became a much more realistic and comfortable position for students to inhabit. The ability to take the third position, outside both cultures, allowed them to take perspective in entirely new ways that led to more complex cognitive reasoning and a more complex and nuanced worldview.

The ability to take the perspective of culturally different persons leads to the development of intercultural competence. Intercultural competence depends on the development of three separate but related dimensions: cognitive (knowledge and cognition), intrapersonal (identity, self-education), and interpersonal (Sorti, 1990). In the study of intercultural competence in American students abroad (Moore and Ortiz, 1999), we identified the characteristics of the interculturally competent person. Interculturally competent students are critical thinkers (embodying one of the primary goals of higher education). They suspend judgment until all the evidence is in. They include a diverse range of knowledge in what they consider to be evidence. They have enough self-knowledge (and a requisite positive sense of self) to know their own limits and can take positive steps to alleviate difficult situations. The process of examining situations from different perspectives encourages a cognitive flexibility that leads to better problem solving both in and out of the classroom.

### **Classroom Strategies to Develop Intercultural Competence**

How are classroom communities where this type of interaction takes place developed? First, it is imperative that students begin talking in class as engaged participants in discussion and with other class members. Developing a sense of community in the classroom encourages students to take risks in sharing their own knowledge and in questioning students and professors about what they know. Interactive acquaintance activities conducted during the first class session can begin this process. I like to offer activities where students get to know personal things about each other and then move the discussion to how they can use this new learning community to support their learning and development. I encourage the sharing of individual cultural characteristics among students to supplement the traditional "name, rank, and major" that usually accompanies such introductions. I might ask students to share three things about themselves that cannot be known from simply observing their appearance. After initial activities, I might then ask students to share what they consider to be their cultural heritage and values. There are many benefits to beginning courses with these types of activities. Students begin to learn about cultural identity from one another, which reinforces the acceptance of all students in the classroom. They start to learn about the impact of each individual's worldview on knowledge and experiences. The following student tells what she has learned from other students in one of her racially diverse classes:

Interacting with them has helped because most of them know more about their cultural background and traditions. They made me want to go and ask questions about my cultural background, because they are always sharing with me and I'm really a little ignorant. I've never really been taught. So I have

to go to the library and check it out or ask aunts and uncles or Mom and Dad. So it's helped me because when I was hanging around in high school with [members of] just my own culture, we never asked these questions—the curiosity was never there.

Second, using cooperative, collaborative, or active learning methods, such as the formation of base groups, can also be helpful in the process of community building. Participating in interactive discussions, case study analyses (similar to critical incidents), and small group activities allows students to begin trusting their own meaning-making and also helps them contextualize course content so that it is reflective of their experiences. If students are able to discover the key concepts I wish to cover for the day on their own through discussion or questioning one another, they retain those concepts much better than if I delivered them from the lectern. I also learn about other cultures and the impact of the college environment on culturally diverse students by listening to the way in which they come to reason about key concepts. There may be disciplines where this type of learning and teaching is more difficult, but there are probably points of difference or controversy in almost any content that students can explore in ways that allow divergent opinions and critical thinking to emerge. These pedagogical techniques help students trust that personal perspectives are welcomed in the class and understand that voicing contextual interpretations of material is acceptable in this classroom.

Third, it is important to design assignments that are also reflective of engaged pedagogy. In writing assignments, students in my courses need to combine their own perspectives and experiences with those of the course material. This higher-order task asks students to engage with the material in more critical ways than simply recounting the story line. When students attempt these assignments for the first time, they almost always have a difficult time. Their previous educational experiences have taught them that there are two kinds of written work, the traditional research paper and the reflective journal. Combining elements of the two requires critical analysis and the inclusion of knowledge drawn from personal contexts. Assignments like this call for the inclusion of worldview and make perspective taking almost natural. I also use group projects frequently. These assignments prompt students to include diverse perspectives in the finished product and help students develop communication and mediation skills in creating the product. The time they spend in contact with students who may not necessarily be a part of their social group also aids in learning more about students from different backgrounds. Intentionally grouping students is also helpful in meeting this goal. Of course, any professor who has attempted projects like this knows that they are fraught with challenges, but I believe they are ones worth facing up to.

In conclusion, the true challenges lie in helping students discover the value in learning about culture and its impact on individuals, interpersonal

interactions, and society. The bigger challenge is generating excitement about these discoveries. This means being patient with students and ourselves: we need to understand that learning is also a developmental journey. This is perhaps the biggest challenge—to remain patient yet push for change. Mistakes will be made, both by students and professors. In fact, an unexpected outcome may be that students learn that even people with doctorates make mistakes, and that serves to heighten their confidence as constructors of knowledge. Creating communities where cultural identity can be expressed openly and applied to knowledge learned also means creating communities where students feel safe in taking risks, which fosters a hunger for analysis and reflection of content regardless of its disciplinary origins. And that is an honorable goal for any educator.

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